

DARE YOU RESIST YOUR GOVERNMENT? Romans 13:2-4

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The relationship of the church to the state has long been a controversial subject among professing Christians. The Roman Catholics do not believe in separation of church and state, but feel that the church is to dictate policy to the state. The Reformed Churches (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed) believe in separation of church and state, but think the state should listen to the church on matters of morals and ethics. The Baptists have traditionally held to strict separation of church and state, and some extreme groups have gone so far as to say a Christian cannot even participate in any political activity. The government of America was set up by Protestants who believed in separation of church and state, and our representative government is patterned after the Presbyterian form of government which had its beginnings in the Reformation.

The general principles of the Christian's relationship to government are clearly set forth in Romans 13:1: All government, good or bad, is ordained of God, so all Christians are to be in submission to the government which God in his sovereignty has put over them. Submission is necessary because Christians are not to be known as political reactionaries; they are sent into this world to be witnesses to it. The Christian is not to revolt against government for political purposes, although he most certainly is expected to hold political convictions and may be deeply involved in the politics of his country. It is quite possible for two Christians to hold different political convictions and still worship in the same church.

A Christian may disobey his government only for religious purposes when the demands of the state conflict with the commands of God. The Christian must then obey God rather than men. When may the Christian disobey the state? When it takes away his right to propagate the gospel or forces him to do an unchristian act.

DO NOT REVOLT AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT — Romans 13:2

"Whoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God" The word "resisteth" means "arranges in battle" or "resists by force." The point is that a Christian is to have no part in rebellion or revolution against his government, whether it be good or bad. Generally government establishes law and order, and the one thing worse than being under a bad government is being under no government at all (anarchy).

The Christian who is not in submission to civil authority is in rebellion against God himself. The Bible does not forbid legally teaching and agitating for better government if these legal steps do not lead to force and violence. Where law is hard and unreasonable, legitimate protest, not disobedience, is the duty of the Christian. Submission to government does not mean that the Christian cannot protest against evil and corruption, only that such protest must be done by legal means.

The teaching of Romans 13:2 is clear: Christians are not to be a party to revolution. There have been instances in history where Christians have revolted against established government. Oliver Cromwell, a deep Christian, overthrew the Royalists in England in 1647 with his parliamentary armies. George Washington led the Colonial armies against the British in the American revolution. At great moments of crisis in history, believers have had to make difficult decisions. They stand or fall before God.

In our own American Revolution, Christians were divided over how to understand their responsibilities to the state and over the right to revolt. Some, especially those of the Church of England, fought on the side of the British in an attempt to be faithful to Romans 13:1. Others fled to Canada. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was a Tory and sided with England rather than with the Colonies because of his biblical conviction. Yet the Reformed Churches, especially the Presbyterians, felt the revolution justifiable. This revolution was somewhat different from others as it did not result in a breakdown of law and order. Political, social, and economic order was maintained. In fact, the Congress of 1774 had no thoughts of revolution and tried for two years to gain equal representation by lawful means. History shows that Britain, not the Colonies, forced the issue. It was in 1776, after much prayer, that the Continental Congress decided to declare its independence. This ultimately led to the formation of our Declaration of Independence, which acknowledges God as the Creator of all men. Our Constitution and form of government were set forth to a nation that was God-fearing, Christ-living, and biblically oriented.¹ However, this does not prove it was biblically correct to revolt.

¹Rev. William E. Hill, Jr. in an article, "Democracy's Doom" (*The Presbyterian Journal*, March 21, 1962), wrote: "The American system of constitutional government grew directly out of the Reformation convictions brought to this land from Scotland and England. Indeed, our Constitution, itself, is patterned after the Presbyterian system of government. Democracy must grow in the soil of an intelligent, God-fearing people who know, believe in, and practice the precepts of the Bible... Democracy depends upon a profound belief in a Holy and Sovereign God, the dignity and moral responsibility of man; the recognition of moral law, an abhorrence of violence, a love of law and order, a sense of brotherhood, which only Bible-believing Christianity can give. In any other soil, democracy will ultimately denigrate into rivalry, factionalism and violence, ending as Aristotle predicted — in 'chaos or dictatorship.'

“And they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation [judgment or judicial discipline].” Government exists to preserve law and order, and any Christian who opposes his government by force will receive just retribution from the state. To resist government is to resist God because government is merely an instrument of God. A Christian must be punished by the state if he opposes the state for political reasons. This ought to caution Christians against identifying themselves with political causes to oppose or subvert the government of their country. When they do, they are likely to suffer for it — even more likely to suffer than the wicked themselves. God may pass over the sin of the unsaved to give them opportunity to repent, but he brings divine discipline upon Christians for their rebellion. Ignorance is never an excuse for rebellion against God’s laws.

In the past Christians have verbally sided against the existing government, and sometimes they have been guilty of violence and treason. When the government brought just retribution against them, the dissenting Christians claimed they were being persecuted for their Christian beliefs. This is not true; they were suffering as deluded Christians who were political reactionaries. This was a common thing in the Reformation. The Mennonite brethren in Russia were a wealthy and prospering people. When the government of the Czar put some restraints on them that affected their pocketbooks, they opposed him on a political basis. The Czar brought terrible persecution on the Mennonites and they fled to other countries. Did they suffer as Christians or as political reactionaries?

GOVERNMENT IS GOD’S INSTRUMENT TO RESTRAIN EVIL — Romans 13:3

“For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power?” Men cannot be left without restraint, for then there would be chaos. Government is ordained by God to keep down the sinful acts of depraved men. The state exists to preserve moral order.

State rulers, with few exceptions, have primarily punished evil-doers. Even in the early church, the Roman emperors generally persecuted Christians not because of raw malice, but because they mistakenly thought that the peace and safety of the state were imperilled by the Christians’ refusal to honor the pagan gods.

“Do that which is good, and thou shalt have the praise of the same.” If the Christian does good and obeys the state, he ought to be free from fear of the state. The state judges what is wrong and approves what is right. If we keep the law of the state, the government generally appreciates and respects it. Of course, throughout history there have been evil governments in which this principle has not held true, but the general trend has been that God has restrained civil evil through civil government.

GOVERNMENT EXISTS FOR THE CHRISTIAN'S GOOD — Romans 13:4

“For he is the minister of God to thee for good.” A “minister” is one who serves as an agent for a power, force, etc. All governments are carrying on a service for God by curbing the sin of men. Governments help Christians by protecting them from much persecution from the world. If there were no government, Christians would suffer unmercifully at the hands of satanically inspired men.

“But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid: for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” In both ancient and modern times, the sword has been carried before sovereigns as a symbol of justice and of the right of capital punishment. Those who do evil are to be punished by the state in justice.

The authority of the government to use capital punishment is a biblical truth and should be supported by all Christians. “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man” (Gen. 9:6). Those who oppose capital punishment are themselves opposing the Word of God and undermining the very foundation of human government. The government’s right to take life is not “legal murder” as some call it, nor is it simply a relic of a more barbarous age. (It is hard to understand how any age could be more barbarous than our own when the atomic bomb and other destructive weapons are considered.) Capital punishment is the avenging hand of God himself operating through human instruments. When a criminal is executed for a crime, the executioner is not the one who has taken the life, nor is it even the state; it is God carrying out his judgment. The state and executioner are simply agents. Capital punishment is the act of God in human society.

CONCLUSION

This section of Scripture has shown us that God is sovereign over all governments, and that he does as he pleases among kings, dictators, parliaments, and congresses. He is also sovereign over individuals, and has decreed that he will save men only on the basis of the person and death of Jesus Christ. There is no other way to know God except through Christ. God will sovereignly take men to heaven or cast them into hell. He will save only those who have received his Son as Lord and Saviour from his sin. Are you prepared to meet Almighty God?